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PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV
DE RUEHRO #0275/01 0401622
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 091622Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7157
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0343
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE 2150
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN 8334
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES 2288

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000275

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: INTERIOR OFFICIAL ON ANTI-AMERICAN VIOLENCE AND
GOVERNMENT STABILITY

REF: A. ROME 0241
[1](#)B. 06 ROME 0584

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Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Vice Minister of Interior Marco Minnitti says that anti-Dal Molin demonstrations scheduled for February 17 could be a decisive moment for anti-American activities, either leading to a calming-down or possibly fueling more activity. He told Pol M/C February 7 that both sides should work to defuse the public disagreement over an Afghanistan op-ed co-signed by Ambassador Spogli and several other NATO envoys.

Minnitti said the governing coalition had come out in the right place on key issues, to include Afghanistan, and asked that we keep our "eye on the ball," not the political motion around it. In particular, he asked that the USG not take actions that could create the impression of "coolness" in relations. The Prodi government lacks a functioning majority in the Senate, and it would not help matters if it were to fall. This would precipitate a chaotic pre-election period in Italy, and that in turn would make government management of the political fallout from overseas casualties very difficult -- just as we prepare to face an anticipated spring Taliban offensive and growing uncertainty over stability in Lebanon. END SUMMARY.

THREAT OF EXTREMIST RESURGENCE

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Pol M/C, accompanied by Poloff, met February 7 with Vice Minister of Interior Marco Minnitti to seek his views on the possibility of radical left violence in the light of the Dal Molin basing controversy and reactions to the open letter on Afghanistan written by six NATO ambassadors (REF A), including Ambassador Spogli. Minnitti, a member of the Democrats of the Left (DS) is considered very close to FM D'Alema and is responsible for coordinating police activities at the MoI, among other responsibilities. Minnitti, a former U/S at the Ministry of Defense, clearly remains active in defense issues.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Pol M/C told Minnitti the U.S. was concerned at the implications of far-left radicals becoming increasingly energized by the recent controversy over the U.S. Army expansion at Dal Molin. Minnitti said the Italian government has essentially defeated the Red Brigade and associated extremist groups, but there have been signs of recent activity among fringe elements of both the extreme left and the extreme right. He cited, as an example, two recent "demonstration bombs" at the facilities of a parachute

brigade in Livorno and a military-industrial complex in Milan. The GOI suspects both actions may have been perpetrated by the same group. He also noted the reemergence of propaganda fliers by violence-prone extremist groups on both the left and the right.

¶4. (S/NF) Minnitti said the government's newly announced zero-tolerance policy against soccer fans after the death last week of an Italian police officer during a post-soccer game riot is strategically linked to the approach the GOI is taking against former Red Brigade and violent far right elements. First, Minnitti said it is a way of reassuring police forces that the government stands firmly behind them. Secondly, the policy is meant to send a message to all extremist groups that the government is prepared to act. (Note: Though Italy's police forces are considered politically neutral, especially the Carabinieri, the National Police Force has sometimes been skeptical of the former communist's politicians commitment to law and order. Minnitti also seemed concerned that the police might be "excited" after the death of one of its colleagues. End Note.)

FEBRUARY 17 KEY TO CALMING PROTESTS

¶5. (S/NF) Minnitti told Pol M/C that the February 17 anti-Dal Molin demonstrations could be a decisive moment for anti-American activities. The GOI is planning a strong police presence to maintain order and a peaceful demonstration could lead to a general subsiding of anti-American protests. However, he said, if the demonstration were to turn violent it could become a harbinger of further violence.

GOVERNMENT WILL MAINTAIN INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

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¶6. (C/NF) Minnitti reminded Pol M/C of their first meeting nearly 10 months ago at which he had told us a center-left government would maintain its firm commitment to NATO, Afghanistan and the Balkans (REF B). He said the center-left government had fulfilled those commitments despite the political costs, and Minnitti affirmed that the GoI would continue to maintain them. He said the February 6 political decision by party leaders to support Afghan ISAF mission funding was a clear sign of this.

BUT THE COALITION IS WEAK--WITH NOTHING BETTER TO COME

¶7. (C/NF) Minnitti stated bluntly that the government does not have an effective majority in the Senate, and that it could not be taken for granted that the government would gain passage of the Afghan-ISAF mission funding bill in the Senate given that just a handful of dissident Senators could disrupt the majority. Referring in veiled terms to the recent op-ed, Minnitti said the U.S. should be sensitive to the government's coalition management problems. The core was solid, and the coalition had come out in the right place on key issues, to include Afghanistan. The Vicenza base expansion decision had been difficult, but they had done it. The Afghan commitment was not an easy issue for some coalition partners, but the leadership had prevailed. He asked that we "keep our eye on the ball," not the political motion around it, and especially that the USG not take actions that could create the impression of "coolness" in relations. What is needed now, he said, is to "un-dramatize" the flap in US-Italy relations.

NOT IN U.S. INTEREST TO SEE PRODI FALL

¶8. (C/NF) Pol M/C said our perspective was focused on the importance of success in Afghanistan. We had undertaken a

major policy review last fall and recently had announced our intent to increase our own commitment there by more than \$10 billion dollars in assistance, plus additional troops. But any strategy for success will need the continued support of all NATO contributors, not only militarily, but in terms of politics, the economy, counter-narcotics, and reconstruction and development assistance. All of our ambassadors have been enjoined to promote this goal, whether directly to governments or via public diplomacy. Our op-ed was timed to come between the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, and the defense ministers meeting in Seville. We faced a Taliban offensive within a few short months. We had to be ready with our best effort. The impulse of the op-end had nothing to do with Italy's internal politics; it stemmed from our concern about Afghanistan. That was the long and short of it.

¶9. (C/NF) Minnitti acknowledged this but, repeating the message several times, nevertheless went on to say it would not be in the U.S. interest to see an Italian government crisis right now. Italy was well aware of the prospect of a strong spring offensive by the Taliban; there was also the possibility of instability in Lebanon, where Italian troops are deployed. If the Italian government were in "crisis", at a time when its soldiers are incurring casualties/fatalities in overseas conflicts, its leaders would be susceptible to public pressure for their return. (Note: By crisis, Minnitti meant a situation in which the parliament has been dissolved and elections are pending. End Note.) The death of three soldiers becomes an occasion for national mourning. A legitimate governing majority would be needed to manage political fallout. Commenting that the center-right was also in disarray, Minnitti concluded that there were no good options to the Prodi government for the next year and a half.

¶10. (C/NF) Note: Minnitti dismissed the idea of a technical government as unfeasible should the Prodi government fall and said the only option would be the immediate call for elections. He explained that any technical government would need former PM Berlusconi's support, but that Berlusconi feels he would easily win elections should they be called now. As such, Berlusconi would not support a technical government and former Chamber President Casini's UDC party does not have enough votes in the Senate to deliver a governing majority. End note.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C/NF) Minnitti, a senior DS politician and close associate of FM D'Alema, is clearly concerned that the government could actually fall over the vote to extend funding for Afghanistan mission. He had a clear message: look at what we do, not how we get there, and please allow us a little space for our internal management. It won't help us get to the right place if the USG projects coolness in our relations. So we both need to calm things down. At one point he commented, "you keep moving the finish line back," i.e. for the Prodi government to meet the requirements of U.S. friendship. END COMMENT.
SPOGLI